Death toll in Guyana hits 383

F Post 11/21/78

By MARTIN MERZER

GEORGETOWN, Guyana (AP) — Troops swept through a steaming jungle Monday in search of American religious zealots who fled their remote compound and left behind a scene of horror and death — the bodies of at least 383 fellow cultists, some shot, most apparently poisoned by their own hands in a mass suicide.

Among the bodies found at the camp were those of the sect's fanatical founder, the Rev. Jim Jones, his wife and one of their children, said Police Chief C. Augustus.

Soldiers counted 163 women, 138 men and 82 children among the dead. They all were believed to be Americans. Many reportedly had lined up to take doses of poison from a tub.

The mass deaths apparently occurred about an hour or more after members of the California sect, People's Temple, ambushed a visiting investigative group led by Congressman Leo J. Ryan, killing Ryan and four others.

Augustus said there was no evidence of gunshot wounds on the bodies of Jones, his wife or child. "It appears that they drank some poison," he said.

Still unaccounted for were between 500 and 900 of Jones' followers, who fled into the jungle around the agricultural commune, 150 miles northwest of this South American capital.

The killings and mass suicide, triggered by Ryan's inspection visit, apparently were the final cry of a violence-hardened and paranoid group that saw

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the world closing in.

American lawyer Mark Lane, who escaped from the jungle camp just before the mass deaths, told reporters of terrifying hours he and another attorney, Charles Garry, spent in the camp and the rainy jungle nearby late Saturday and Sunday.

Lane, a prominent champion of controversial cases and a legal counsel to the sect, said he and Garry were barred from a mass meeting at the camp, Jonestown, but that they heard residents discussing communal suicide over a loudspeaker. Lane said one spoke of "the beauty of death as part of our struggle."

The cultists reportedly had long considered mass suicide if they felt their sect threatened. Jones and the sect had been under investigation in California before he founded the Guyana camp last year.

Lane said the meeting began at about 5 p.m. Only 40 minutes earlier, a half-dozen sect members ambushed Ryan's group at a nearby airstrip, where they were trying to fly out some disenchanted sect members.